

Guide to Tree and Shrub Identification: Part IV

Last week I discussed how to identify some common Hill Country vines by their leaf pattern. Today I will discuss how to identify some common trees and shrubs that all have a simple leaf, alternate arrangement, and an entire margin. If you don't remember the definitions of those terms from the previous columns, past columns can be found on my website, www.hillcountrynaturalist.org/columns.htm.

Everything I will discuss today will have a simple leaf type, the leaves will be arranged along the branch in an alternate arrangement and the leaf margins (edge) will be smooth or "entire". But as the accompanying photograph shows, there are big differences in the leaves even within the above description.

Starting with the smallest leaf and progressing to the largest, cenizo has the smallest leaves, usually less than an inch long and they tend to be oblong or elliptical in shape. The leaf arrangement is alternate, although the tiny leaves tend to cluster so closely together that it may be difficult to determine that. Cenizo stands out from most other native shrubs in that it is gray-green in color—some think of it as silver-gray. It is a rounded shrub usually 3 to 10 feet tall. Cenizo is evergreen and flowers throughout the spring, summer and fall after a rain.

The leaves of Texas persimmon are seldom much more than an inch long, oblong or oval in shape, usually wider at the tip. The leaves are frequently slightly inrolled (convex from the top) and have a velvety feel. Its leaves can be persistent in mild winters. Persimmons are dioecious, meaning there are male and female plants, and only female plants produce fruit. The round fruit can be up to an inch in diameter and turns from green to black in the fall. Persimmons are usually shrubs to small trees and tend to have peeling bark showing smooth trunks and limbs.

Gum bumelia (also known as chittimwood or gum elastic) has 1 to 3 inch long oblong leaves that are narrow at the base and wider at the tip. It is a medium-sized tree that has long straight thorns. It produces small white blooms in July.

After cedar, live oaks are probably the most common woody species in the Hill Country. The leaves are oblong, usually 1 to 4 inches long, dark green on top and lighter green underneath. They are referred to as semi-evergreen because they keep their leaves throughout the winter, then drop their leaves in the spring and regrow new leaves immediately. New leaves or leaves on small shoots may have sharp lobes or points on the leaves.

Hackberry leaves are usually 2 to 5 inches long, tapering to a point, and rough in texture. Hackberries may have some leaves with teeth on parts of the leaf. Hackberries can often be identified just from the bark that usually has conspicuous bumps or "warts".

These trees produce berries that birds and other animals like and are a good wildlife habitat tree. There are two species hackberries in the Hill Country; netleaf hackberry and sugarberry.

Carolina buckthorns are large shrubs with elliptic 2 to 4 inch leaves that are characterized by having very prominent veins and midrib, visible from both the top and bottom. The surface of the leaves is smooth. In spite of the name, Carolina buckthorns do not have thorns.

Texas redbud is a small tree with large, 2 to 6 inch nearly round or heart-shaped leaves that grow on a long petiole (stem). Pink blossom clusters come out before new leaves in the spring. There are two closely related species of redbuds, eastern redbuds which do not grow well here and have generally larger leaves, and Mexican redbuds which have smaller, thicker leaves with wavy margins.

Again, all of the trees and shrubs discussed here have simple leaves with an entire margin, arranged in an alternate manner. Other trees and shrubs that have the same type of leaf but are less common include the American smoketree, spicebush, bois d'arc and the exotic, invasive Chinese tallow.

In identifying trees and shrubs, it is important to never just look at one leaf or one branch, but to look at several parts of the plant as Mother Nature doesn't always make everything the same. Also, feeling of the leaves gives clues of texture, thickness or stiffness that can also help to distinguish different species.

Next week I will write about species with simple, alternate leaves with toothed margins.

Until next time...

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